Black Church Culture: How Clergy Frame Social Problems and Solutions

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Abstract: The contemporary Black Church continues to respond to historic social problems in the Black community as well as newer ones. Black Church culture characterized by scripture, rituals, stories, prayer, self-help, and songs has fostered activism. Yet few recent studies examine whether and how Black Church culture is appropriated by clergy to understand social problems. This study examines the sentiments of thirty-five Black clergy. Of particular interest is how clergy make sense of social problems and solutions as well as whether framing of the discourse is influenced by Black Church culture. Most clergy understand social problems in the Black community based on an economic-focused frame. Moreover, discussions are informed by a master frame associated with a static model of the historic Black Church as well as iconic symbols, prophetic scripture, and a self-help tradition.

Keywords: Black church culture, clergy, social problems

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Few scholars would contest the indelible role of the historic Black Church in responding to social problems in the Black community (DuBois,1903[2003]; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Mays & Nicholson, 1933). Previous studies suggest that Black Church culture, characterized by beliefs, stories, songs, symbols, sacred scripture, and rituals, often provided the impetus for community involvement (Cone, 1995; Hill, 1997; Morris, 1984). The Black community continues to face historic challenges associated with poverty and newer concerns such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Recent quantitative research illustrates the importance of Black Church culture to provide meaning and motivation for community outreach efforts (Barnes, 2005a, 2006). However, fewer qualitative studies have examined whether and how Black Church culture affects clergy's understanding of social problems and possible responses. This topic is important because research shows that Black Church clergy often have greater influence over their churches than their White counterparts (Billingsley, 1999; McRoberts, 2003; Wilmore, 1994). Thus their attitudes and beliefs would be expected to have a greater impact on church-based community action.

How do Black clergy make sense of the chronic social challenges that plague the Black community? This study considers the thought processes of thirty-five Black clergy. Central to the analysis is also whether and how Black Church culture informs and influences the discourse. Focus group results and frame analysis are used to explore two research questions; (1) how do clergy identify and frame (i.e., purposely arrange, produce, and present) social problems?; and (2) do their views and solutions include Black Church cultural

components such as sacred scripture, rituals, symbols, and a self-help tradition? To my knowledge, few studies consider the socio-psychological features of Black Church clergy decision-making as well as the important academic and applied dimensions of such queries.

BLACK CHURCH CULTURAL REPERTOIRE: FRAMING THE DISCOURSE ABOUT SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

There are over 75,000 Black churches in the United States (U.S.) that are denominationally and theologically diverse (Billingsley, 1992). Yet literature suggests certain overarching symbols and beliefs that emerge in the collective called *The Black Church* that reflect a common religious tradition. Thus although heterogeneity exists, studies support the existence of Black Church culture (Barnes, 2005a; Carter, 1976; Cavendish, 2001; Cone, 1995; Hill, 1997). Based on Cultural Theory, Swidler (1986) defines culture as "symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life" (p. 273). A cultural "tool kit" provides meaning and motivation to mobilize resources by enabling people to determine problems, understand them, and develop solutions. This study seeks to consider Black Church cultural tools that may influence how church leaders understand social problems and the rationale for their views.

Central to this research is how Black Church culture is potentially framed to influence views and solutions (Goffman, 1974; Snow et al., 1986). Benford (1993) contends that framing and the resulting actions can provide shared group identity

and consensus - which can influence terminology and definitions that undergird decisions. How Black Church leaders frame the discourse about contemporary social problems would be expected to influence whether and how they respond. However, conflict about how a problem should be best framed can undermine group identity formation, consensus, and remedies. Cultural components can also cause routinization that heightens awareness of concerns and support for redress. Yet routinization may make it difficult to alter long-held views and strategies such that recurring problems may become more entrenched or seem insurmountable (Swidler, 1995).

The Black Church cultural repertoire includes beliefs, biblical redaction, stories, rituals, music, prayer, call-and-response, and symbols characteristic of the Black experience (Barnes, 2005a; Cone, 1995; Costen, 1993; Morris, 1984; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998). Other studies conclude that a self-help tradition that promotes community outreach and group allegiance is also indicative of Black Church culture (Drake and Cayton, 1940). Furthermore, biblical text and a self-help tradition inform Blacks about: appropriate spiritual and secular pursuits; whether and how God plans to intervene; and, whether and how *they* should bring about change (Cavendish, 2001; Harris, 1987). These cultural components help people make sense of the world, respond to group and individual concerns, experience validation, and espouse a collective vision (Johnston and Klandermans, 1995; Marx, 1971; Wilmore, 1995). According to Swidler (1986, 1995), culture provides the elements from which strategies of action are constructed. She suggests that outcomes from cultural tools resonate with supporters and inform the actions they take. Her description can be appropriated to Black Church dynamics. For

example, Wilmore (1995) contends that cultural tools such as music, preaching, prayer and worship are used by clergy to transform adherents into change agents. Moreover, Hill (1997) describes how this same culture is used by church leaders to foster specific outcomes; "using the inherited verbal artistry and eloquence of the griots, they crafted sermons, prayers, narratives, hymns, poems, essays, and songs to educate, uplift, and stir the African American spirit toward social action" (26).

When considering biblical redaction, Wilmore (1994) suggests that the bible has been appropriated to engender optimism and to meet spiritual and temporal needs. In addition, scripture has been used to motivate community service endeavors (Barnes, 2005a; Wilmore, 1995). Cavendish (2001) describes the self-help tradition and biblical usage in order to; "examine the strategies clergy…use to generate and sustain their parishioners' participation in social action programs...making the scriptures relevant to the circumstances in his urban community" (p. 203-206). Additionally, McRoberts (2003) notes clergy "rely on the Holy Spirit and Biblical insight…as 'fuel' for libratory struggle and community development work" (p.109). These scholars conclude that Black Church cultural components can be used to shape, frame, and promote action and reflect: belief and confidence in a just, impartial God who cares for followers unconditionally; individuals who act as they anticipate deliverance; scriptural themes and other symbolic scenarios of victory over seemingly insurmountable odds; and, evidence of the inherent value of people of African descent and their right to equality. These cultural tools have been used to: organize, develop, and promote slave revolts; stymie fear of beatings, job-termination, lynching and death; and, encourage direct and indirect resistance, sit-ins, freedom rides, voting drives, and

economic programs (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Morris, 1984; Wilmore, 1995). Black Church culture reflects potential frame contents or components (i.e., "the what") rather than the actual framing process (i.e., "the how"). Thus culture influences the *process* by which strategies of action are developed, but does not necessarily dictate their ends (Swidler, 1986) – hence the existence of social problems in the Black community despite Black Church efforts.

FRAME ANALYSIS AND CULTURAL TOOLS

Frame analysis is a commonly used methodology in linguistics, social psychology, and political science that is particularly germane here. Bolman and Deal (1991) posit that frames are socially-influenced images that serve as rubrics to explain, evaluate, and change society. For them, varied framing approaches enable groups to adapt to changing needs. They contend that framing based on cultural tools is more effective at invoking meaning and motivation in institutions than actual rules, regulations, and managerial authority. Thus what an issue, problem, or event *means* to group members is as important as the problem, issue or event itself. However, conflicting meanings can undermine the ability to address problems and develop appropriate solutions. According to Bolman and Deal, culture can empower groups that experience paradoxes, uncertainty, and difficult situations. Thus for clergy, cultural symbols may provide meaning for historic and contemporary social problems and subsequent solutions.

For Goffman (1974, 1981), frames reflect systematic cognitive methods of organizing symbols, events, and contexts to facilitate daily experiences. Moreover, he is credited with explaining seemingly ritualistic ways in which people understand and organize their social worlds. Similarly,

Snow and Benford (1988) suggest that a frame is an "interpretative schema that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action" (p. 137). By mentally organizing experiences and actions, frames imbue them with meaning (Benford & Snow, 2000; Oliver & Johnston, 2005). Scholarship on frames and social movements suggests that framing functions to call attention to pressing social problems, persuade people that injustices have occurred, and convince them to take action (Gitlin, 1980; Johnston and Noakes, 2005; Ryan, 1991). Such *collective action frames* help analyze events and identify responsible parties in ways that resonate with potential supporters. The process entails creating interpretive packages to narrowly explain existing problems using cultural markers that make sense to possible participants. The nature of framing means that certain issues are elevated in importance and others minimized or ignored. However, certain "keys" evoke the framing recollection process and enable people to think and behave appropriately (Goffman, 1974, 1981). Several other authors provide foundation concepts to detail the framing process.

Snow and Benford (1988) posit three basic tasks of frames. They are: diagnostic (i.e., inform people about what is wrong and why), prognostic (i.e., present a solution that emerges from the diagnosis), and motivational (i.e., encourage collective action). Furthermore, in order to promote frames, they must be articulated or amplified. Use of cultural tools (Swidler, 1986) that resonate with current and potential participants constitutes articulation (Snow & Benford, 1988). Similarly, frame amplification refers to the strategic selection and use of words, symbols, images, historical examples, or beliefs from a

broader frame. Snow et al's (1986) concepts of frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation describe strategies to: link complementary frames; develop slogans and catch phrases that encapsulate a frame; enable existing frames to be used in new arenas; and, generate new frame content from an existing frame, respectively. This terminology describes strategies and steps used by framers to convincingly convey their stance. It is also crucial to consider the credibility of frame promoters, competing frames, and the existence of master frames (Gamson, 1992; Johnston & Noakes, 2005). In order to examine framing in the Black Church tradition, it is important to assess views that can foster or undermine actions, as well as broader socio-psychological and systemic forces that can affect clergy perspectives.

STUDYING BLACK CLERGY VIEWS: PROCESS AND CONTEXT

The focus groups took place at a southern seminary that is a consortium of six denominational seminaries located in a metropolitan city with a population of more than 2 million persons. It was founded in the mid-20th century to educate graduate students for ministry and service. Persons are trained for the pastorate and church work; they are also encouraged to become public theologians and forge alliances between congregations and secular institutions. The seminaries' theological objective reflects a bible-centered, social action-oriented focus on the study of Black religion, including churches of Africa and the Caribbean. As of fall 2006, the school had an enrollment of over 450 students; more than fifteen denominations are represented. Students affiliate with the seminary that reflects their respective denominations or attend "at large". Most students are part of one of the following traditions; African Methodist Episcopal

(AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ), Baptist, Church of God in Christ (COGIC), Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME), Presbyterian Church USA, and United Methodist (UM). Although White, Asian, and international students are represented, over 90 percent of students are Black. Fifty-four percent are male. The seminary offers various Masters degrees as well as Divinity, Doctor of Ministry, and Doctor of Theology degrees.

A total of three focus groups were completed with thirty-five (35) Black Church clergy seminarians (15, 12, and 8 members were included in Groups 1, 2, and 3, respectively). Focus groups are appropriate here because the study objectives are to garner information about views and experiences about a specific issue; gather insight on varied views about the topic; and, potentially identify shared experiences. Because the objective is specificity rather than generalizations, focus groups are a viable data gathering method. Focus groups can also help create a safe, non-threatening atmosphere to discuss potentially challenging subjects (Morgan & Krueger, 1993; Zeller, 1993). Such groups make it possible to assess beliefs, feelings, and reactions in ways that are not feasible using traditional survey approaches. Lastly, this method can serve as a forum for change because findings are often more accessible to lay communities than statistical analyses– an important applied objective here (Marczak & Sewell, 2006). As posited by Morgan and Kreuger (1993), focus groups are useful when interested in assessing the use of group language and culture – which is also a central goal in the current endeavor.

Each session, about two hours in length, was video- and audio-taped on campus during the summer of 2003. A purposive sample of seminarians was selected because studies show that such people are more likely to take part in

community outreach, can be more theologically open, and are often more receptive to non-traditional approaches to meet church and community needs (Billingsley, 1999; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Pastors, preachers, evangelists, ministers of music, and Christian educators were included here. Five clergy were pastors of predominately Black churches. The sample included 12 United Methodist, 9 Baptist, 5 African Methodist Episcopal, 5 At-Large, and 4 Presbyterian students; thus the former two groups were disproportionately represented. Pentecostals were not represented in the sample. Moreover, clergy were asked to only identify their specific denomination rather than other descriptions such as evangelical. Thus, comments by clergy specifically identified as Pentecostal or evangelical are not included here. The groups consisted of 21 males and 14 females. Heterogeneity existed in terms of vocation, denomination, and sex. A seminary administrator served as key informant and helped gain access to potential group members. Participants were provided a $5.00 stipend for their involvement. This researcher served as moderator.

Five broad questions were posed: (1) What is the most pressing problem facing the Black community/Black Church? (2) How is the Black Church you attend meeting the needs of the Black community? (3) Talk about gender inclusivity and the Black Church - what are your views? (4) Talk about sexual orientation and the Black Church - what are your views? And, (5) How has the Black Church responded to these issues in questions 3 and 4? The groups were not organized to specifically discuss one subject, but rather to consider various topics germane to the contemporary Black Church. Moreover, although clergy provided responses to the above questions about gender and inclusivity, their views

during the broader discussions chronicled below did not center these two issues (refer to Barnes 2009 for clergy comments on these topics). Data transcription was performed by a research associate. Video data were analyzed by this researcher to augment verbiage and detail group dynamics, facial expressions, gestures, and the mood of the discussions. Content analysis was used to uncover emergent, representative patterns, themes, and meanings in the data (Krippendorf, 1980; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998). Scriptural interpretations were performed by this researcher. Unless specifically identified by vocation (i.e., pastor, Christian Educator, evangelist), responses in the findings section were provided by persons who self-identified as clergy, minister, or preacher. For the sake of consistency, the term "clergy" is used as a general category to represent the latter three groups. Other descriptive information has been omitted to insure clergy anonymity.

FRAMING SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Frame analysis helps uncover the thought processes and beliefs of the sample Black clergy. Because frames reflect a strategic synthesis of beliefs that summarize a subject, these results do not do justice to the focus group discussions. However, the four frames that emerge provide valuable insight into clergy sentiments about social problems and possible solutions in the Black community. Subsequent sections include frame summaries and representative quotes.

An Economic-Focused Frame: "The Poor are Always with Us"

In order to understand cleric thought processes, it is initially necessary to determine what they consider the most pressing social problems. Regardless of denomination, gender, or clergy position, the

majority of sample clergy understand the current problems in the Black community to be directly or indirectly related to socioeconomic issues (Hays, 2003; Wilson, 1987). As suggested by the following group discussion, most problems are believed to be systemic in nature and related to economic inequities as evidenced by unemployment, crime, poverty, single-parent households, and incarceration:

Jonathan: High unemployment. Crime. Not having enough opportunities to find suitable jobs that are able to take care of families. They have minimum wage jobs out there, but you can't really support a family on that. (AME clergy)

Catherine: Single parent homes, absence of the fathers. (Baptist Evangelist)

Stephen: I would say violence. There's a lot of peer pressure that would lead people to do stuff like gangs, drug-selling. Prostitution is very rampant, use of addictive substances like crack cocaine. Poverty is another major thing. (AME clergy)

Although the aforementioned problems are tangible, clergy's use of an economic-focused frame also incorporates socio-psychological features. They argue that more intangible problems such as nihilism, angst, and low self-esteem are challenges correlated with tangible ones (West, 1993). And several clergy suggest that tangible problems result in socio-psychological challenges. Gender differences are evident in the type of problems noted; male clergy tend to describe more tangible or external problems (i.e., unemployment, drugs), while female clergy are more likely to point to the prevalence of intangible or socio-psychological problems:

Monica: I think, Cornell West said, you call it nihilism - and it's just something that's keeping us from being able to move beyond a certain area from where we are. So it causes us to feel not as good about ourselves as we should; so therefore we end up having a lot of things like we have homelessness and people looking to other things like drugs and alcohol

to handle these particular issues. (Baptist Christian Educator)

Tom: I see some of the problems that are plaguing the Black community directly related to social issues. They are numerous. However, I feel that these social issues have contributed to an attitude…a sense of hopelessness. I think that's one of the things that tremendously plagues our community. (UM pastor)

According to this frame, a disproportionate percentage of Blacks are socio-economically *and* spiritually impoverished. Clergy responses parallel studies on continued Black Church efforts to combat socioeconomic challenges (Billingsley, 1999; Lincoln &Mamiya, 1990). Yet such continued problems also remind us that, although culture can shape and influence group processes, it cannot guarantee that problems are solved (Swidler, 1986). In addition to summarizing social problems, clergy detail the *effects* of economic disenfranchisement on the aggrieved community (Johnston and Noakes, 2005) that include both a diagnosis and prognosis (Snow and Benford, 1988). As suggested below, sentiments reflect the desire to provide a convincing argument regarding the pervasiveness of socioeconomic challenges among Blacks:

Catherine: The problems are different…The upper class Black's main problem might not be where to sleep or how much I'm going to make or what I'm going to eat. Whereas the lower income person may be more concerned about how I'm going to pay rent next month or how will I pay my child support or just nursery school or how I'm going to make ends meet just living from one paycheck to another. (Baptist Evangelist)

Tamara: Now in terms of the self-esteem issue, I think that's the same regardless of the community. But it's camouflaged in the middle class and in the upper class communities. They have the education, they have the positions, so it appears that self-esteem is high, but it really isn't. If you were to get beneath the degrees you will see that. (Baptist clergy)

In addition to class-based distinctions, explanations include descriptions of the relationship between socio-psychological factors and outcomes. According to the views described above, although material poverty is problematic, the implications of being "poor in spirit" are more far-reaching and mean that, even economically stable Blacks live lives that are compromised.

Scripture influences clergy understandings about why social problems that are partially spiritual, but cyclic in nature, persist across classes. Historically, prophetic scriptural interpretations strengthened Black Church adherents and instilled racial pride despite disparaging experiences in White society (Cone, 1995; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Wilmore, 1995). Leaders conclude that the absence of this cultural component helps explain chronic social ills:

Tom: Well I think another reason for low self-esteem is a personal void - once we've reached a point of accomplishment, when we've done all of the things that society tells us that we're supposed to do. So you may already have the 2.5 kids and the house and the picket fence…except you still have a personal void, and that creates an esteem problem, because now I've checked off all of the things on my little list that I was supposed to do and yet there's still a place that I'm not fulfilled. (UM pastor)

Catherine: So we don't know—we don't know who we are and who we were created to be [paraphrasing Genesis 1:27]. So we end up trying to match up to what society says you ought to be. When we can't meet that based on other issues like injustices and stuff then we start to say, well…obviously there's something wrong with me. Because America says, if you work hard, you ought to be able to accomplish. (Baptist Evangelist)

Jeff: Or I did measure up to all that society says I was supposed to be and there is still a void because I'm not within myself really happy with who I am and not really operating under the knowledge of whose I am [paraphrasing Colossians 1:16]. (Baptist clergy)

The above described frame illustrates belief in the continued existence and negative effects of economic-related problems. Regardless of class standing, effects are considered pervasive and potentially debilitating to one's life chances, positive identity, and healthy sense of self. References to widely used societal symbols of *success* (i.e., 2.5 kids, house, and White picket fence) and the Protestant Ethic as well as symbols of societal *constraints* common in the Black social movement tradition (i.e., sitting in the back of the bus) are used to illustrate that material success does not necessarily guarantee Blacks equality, psychological stability, equal treatment, or respect from less-supportive Whites. Additionally, inclusion of these universalistic symbols or "keys" (Goffman, 1974) found in everyday experiences provide a context to bolster the explanatory ability of the frame, increase the credibility of frame promoters, and illustrate that the economic-focused frame is applicable to many Blacks (Snow & Benford, 1992). Lastly, scriptural interpretation is also used to illustrate that Blacks who experience socio-psychological distress in the larger society often do so because they seek validation from others rather than from God.

The Historic Black Church Frame: "We are Family"

Master frames are considered overarching belief systems that guide other frames and operate to encourage cycles of protest. They include powerful cultural symbols that are often shared across varied groups and overlap with other movements across time. Examples include "rights frames" and "liberation frames" (Kubal, 1998; Snow & Benford, 1992). I contend that this second frame reflects a master frame based on its use of Black Church cultural tools, a counter-narrative informed by Black history, as well as inclusion of elements from pre-

existing civil rights and social action frames (Johnston & Noakes, 2005; Kubal, 1998; Oliver & Johnson, 2005). When discussing the persistence of certain social problems and the required reform, regardless of denomination, clergy role, or gender, the majority of clergy rely heavily on common images and symbols associated with the *historic* Black Church as the model by which they measure effectiveness today. Common traits to describe the historic Black Church include; self-sufficient, united, social justice-oriented, autonomous, and racially proud. The "linked-fate" nature of their understanding of the historic Black Church is also shown by consistent use of pronouns such as "we", "us" and "our" to illustrate connectedness based on both race and religion - and tacitly identify members of the aggrieved group (Tilly, 1997). Shared group goals are also suggested. A time dimension is central to the development of this frame as clergy recollect earlier periods (using phrases such as "back in history", "back then" and past tense) when they believed the Black Church was empowered as a change agent (Goffman, 1974). Black Church involvement in the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) is also used as an historic benchmark to assess contemporary progress. Thus, as an historical event, the CRM represents a central reference for the vast majority of clergy:

Paula: If I look back in history, back to the times right before civil rights when we seemed to have pride…we had a lot of ownership in things and I think that helped us…Economically we were dependent upon ourselves as opposed to being dependent up on someone else. We were able to take pride in what we had…in our teachers and your jobs meant something. We looked out for each other. (At-large student, Chr. Educator)

Joseph: There was more unity back then. I would attribute that to the fact that we all had a common cause. We were striving to fight for independence or social justice or civil rights back in the late fifties, early sixties. So, when everybody's in the same boat,

we come together. But since that time, some of us have arrived as one would think. But you cannot arrive if you still have some that are left behind. (UM clergy)

As illustrated by the next two comments, references are made to a static, prophetic church of the past that addressed a plethora of political, economic, and social issues as part of its' mission (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). However, this frame suggests that time has also eroded the nature and focus of the institution:

Candace: I think back in that time, the Church was looked more so as an institute *for* social justice or for change. That's where issues came from - in the Black Church. Today, because of the type of society that we live in, and we're so spread out, and we're not as unified as we were at that particular time, we're looking mainly as the Church as being our religious base… [rather than] a base for anything else. (UM Christian Educator)

This frame's content is also tied to the credibility and charismatic authority of historic Black Church leaders as frame developers and promoters; for clergy, such leaders embodied the frame's tenets:

Michael: I can remember as a child of the 60s when we would boycott going to school. The whole community wouldn't go to school, you'd go to church…and the Sunday school teachers would actually teach the classes. (Baptist clergy)

Overall, responses tend to consist of anecdotes and, in some, instances, romanticized descriptions that belie CRM limitations and the varied involvement by the overall Black community in that movement (Morris, 1984). However, despite disparate profiles, clergy tend to speak in terms of the *collective*. Leaders understand themselves to be part of this group called the *Black Church* – and thus uniquely qualified to critique it. They also reference periods when they believe the Black Church led the larger Black community to combat a common social problem – economic,

political, and social inequity due to racism and discrimination. Leaders also periodically conflate the Black Church and Black community or generally consider the former to merely be the spiritual extension of the latter (Cone, 1992). Central to the discourse is the tendency to elevate a static, somewhat romanticized image of the historic Black Church as the frame of reference by which today's Black Church should be compared. And the frame should be empirically credible because *past success* by the Black Church during the CRM provides evidence for future actions (Snow & Benford, 1992). As a master frame, *the Historic Black Church Frame* includes elements of both "liberation" and "rights" frames. However, it departs from these frames by centering the historic Black Church as a model for liberation and civil rights. The institution is believed to inculcate features of these earlier frames. Use of this frame is potentially influential because it: taps into Christian symbolism that resonates with Black believers; references a period of collective success despite odds; assumes legitimacy by association with earlier frames; and, includes common cultural tools that may unite diverse groups (Kubal, 1998; McAdams, 1994; Morris, 1984; Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 1997).

Counter-Commentary on the Historic Black Church Frame

By virtue of the development of the second frame, a counter-narrative emerges to describe and critique the contemporary Black Church that focuses on divisive features such as denominationalism, classism, and secularism. Clergy that espouse these views contend that historic cultural tools that once united Black Christians have been co-opted by competition with other Black churches, White congregations, and para-religious

organizations in the secular "religious market." Preoccupation with power is suggested as church leaders jockey for worldly recognition and status at the expense of community concerns. Female sample clergy are more vocal during this phase of the discourse:

Loretta: I agree with him about the churches being competitive, instead of working together. Because I can even see that in the small community I'm in. Denominations are actually dividing us - we come together in church and on Sunday we sing and we pray together. But then when it comes to addressing some of the community problems, it's a power play…a control thing. I want it to be noticed for my church or for my group. Somehow we're going to have to deal with that competitive spirit. (Baptist Evangelist)

According to such leaders, an emphasis on status and economic attainment has resulted in a focus on "Prosperity Gospel" that emphasizes wealth accumulation and health (Harrison, 2005):

Benjamin: Because churches [are concerned with] having the biggest church -the biggest building. Yet, when you start talking about outreach, our concept of outreach hasn't reached outside the four walls of the church--*enough*…it's just talking more about prosperity, it's *talking about* being a Christian, but it's not putting anything into practice. (UM pastor)

This stance accuses Black clergy in the "devolution" of the institution when they acquiesce to church members rather than follow godly dictates:

Margaret: When you come to leadership, a lot of it comes out of the grass roots because they have less to lose, and they have more to gain by getting out there and fighting. Those that are in the upper echelon of the church, across denominations, whether it's Baptist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, they have a tendency to have more to lose in becoming involved to fight. It's not that they don't see these issues, it's not that they don't know they're there, it's not that they don't know that they could come together and do something. But they have been socialized into the economic situation so…they're gonna appease people. (UM clergy)

As posited by the above quotes, rather than foster collective action needed to counter current social problems, contemporary frame promoters are more committed to personal gain. Thus personality and charismatic authority typically used by clergy (i.e., movement entrepreneurs) to encourage social action (Johnston & Noakes, 2005) are being used to placate Blacks for clergy gains. Thus this *new* Black Church is problematic because it has deviated from the dictates, objectives, and stance of its historic predecessor. Critical clergy consider it: more social than sacred; more individualistic than community-minded; priestlier than activist oriented; and, more selfish than selfless.

Black Consciousness and Iconic Symbols

Frame 2 reflects clergy beliefs that are organized using symbols, events, scripture, and institutions from a common understanding of Black Church history. The third frame departs from the two earlier schemas by focusing more on socio-psychological markers and iconic figures. Some clergy understand the collective Black Church to be a repository of Black identity and consciousness (DuBois, 1903[2003]; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990) and refer to the image and ideology of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a point of departure. The use of *Black consciousness* positions the Black Church as a medium to disseminate important elements of Black culture (Cone, 1995; Morris, 1984). Additionally, referencing Dr. King, who for many Blacks personified collective Black Church efforts, illustrates the use of commonly held ideas, beliefs, and symbols to frame social problems (Johnston & Noakes, 2005; McAdam, 1996). Unlike Frame 2, this schema includes more emphasis on present tense descriptions illustrating belief in the continued, albeit attenuated, existence of certain Black Church cultural tools. The

following two quotes focus on church and Black consciousness and their intangible benefits:

Marcus: I think the church has definitely been the pillar of our social consciousness for a number of years. I think a lot of our self-esteem and self - worth has been bought from the church. The Black Church is the place where we can go and feel like we are somebody. Feel like we have power. We feel that we have strength. So I would come to the church's defense and say that we have been doing something, but I think there's more we can do. But we need to get back in touch with our Black consciousness - that will bring us to the point of being more aware of who we are and it will give us power to go out and do the things that need to be done. (UM clergy)

Lester: The church has been from reconstruction and even during slavery, the institution where average Blacks have always met and rallied and responded to the issues of the community. So the church has moved away, has lost focus. However, what I see as going on in the church is what Dr. King always stated. Dr. King stated that it was the strategy of the slave master to prevent the slaves from coming together and to always keep them arguing and bickering among themselves. If there's no unity there, then there will not be any unity. So, I see that same mentality is in the church. (Baptist pastor)

The above clergy believe that Black Church involvement shapes the political consciousness and personal experiences of adherents such that Blacks are able to, not only make sense out of the volatile, social world that existed historically and today, but forge an individual and collective identity that is empowering and action-oriented (Gamson, 1992). Intangible features of this frame promote socio-psychological wherewithal that should manifest in tangible ways. This framing component also parallels Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) description of the relationship between faith and a prophetic stance that requires tangible outcomes as evidence of one's Christian lifestyle. Furthermore, the iconic figure of Dr. King, as a model of Black consciousness, power, pride, self-awareness, and race-awareness is positioned in stark

contrast to that of a slave – the latter physically as well as socio-emotionally fettered and unable to aid himself or her people.

Several clergy extend symbolic references to connect the Black experience, African ancestry, and images of other important historic Black iconic figures. For these clergy, increased Black consciousness will result in increased efforts to identify and combat social problems:

Jacob: I think that we have not kept the Black consciousness at the forefront…stemming from our roots and who we were. We come from a line of men who were kings and women who were queens. When we trace our history back to Africa—we are a rich people. We would find out that even now in America we don't only make it out of our communities or out of poverty by playing sports, by being an actor. You can be a Frederick Douglas, you can be a George Washington Carver, you can be an intellect. We need to know that that's what we are capable of doing. (Presbyterian clergy)

Another clergy refers to the portrait of an African village as a rubric of communal responsibility:

Rochelle: That community involvement, that cohesiveness that the Black community used to have--is not there anymore…it was like, it takes a village—well then we were a village. Now we're just kind of all separated, you know. It's not there anymore. (Presbyterian clergy)

The above descriptions reflect the use of cultural elements both from the broader Black community and the Black Church to frame and critique the contemporary Church. Male clergy are more vocal here. Their comments also suggest the fluidity with which most sample members understand the Black Church and community. The Black Church becomes an extension of the larger Black community; the sacred and secular are correlated (Cone, 1992; DuBois, 1903[2003]). For such clergy, the Black Church is fueled by Black identity and Black consciousness and critical

for the community action that is now needed. Sample members also believe that Black clergy should be the primary leaders to articulate social problems, preach the message to current and potential believers, and develop strategies (Benford and Snow, 2000; Johnston & Noakes, 2005).

Holistic Church Strategies: Healing and Unity

The use of Black Church culture is also evident in how most respondents understand possible solutions to address both spiritual and temporal needs. This fourth frame bridges the tangible and intangible problems identified in Frame 1, presupposes the existence of an overarching collective called the *Black Church*, and explains the need for inter-church resource sharing. It also suggests the importance of transforming existing frames to new ones that better resonate with believers and reflect the varied Black community concerns (Snow et al., 1986). Clergy refer to scripture, common catchphrases, and anecdotes from Black culture and the broader society, but apply them to a call for transformation. The following comments promote unity rather than the tendency to focus on immediate concerns and short-term solutions that undermine reform:

Benjamin: What happens when you have everything independently? You're not on the same page. You have duplicate services. So you have a food pantry over on this corner. Then you have another food pantry, but it's not really addressing the needs. There's an old proverb, a saying, if you give a person a fish they can eat one time, you teach them how to fish they can eat for a lifetime. So we don't have that concept down. We are doing some things, but we can do more. (UM pastor)

Other group members believe that unity would be difficult to establish without a psychological transformation among churches, congregants, and in the larger Black community. By doing so, Black

Church leaders would become more accountable and community members would become more empowered. As noted in the following pastor's quote, scripture as well as a catchphrase from the Civil Rights era ("I am somebody") are used to explain and emphasize the frame. This respondent's use of common biblical metaphors that correlate spiritual and vegetative growth reminds readers that transformation takes time and requires a process to be fruitful *(The holy bible,* 1989):

Terry: Because whether you realize it or not, these people have been kicked and talked about and done so wrong to the point that they're saying, well I'm nobody, I'm nothing. So I try to reassure them, and say, well look, in God's eyes, not the way humans look at you - this is the way God looks at you [parallels scripture such as John 3:16]. So it's trying to give them a little self-assurance in saying - I'm somebody. But, this type of ministry - it requires planting that seed and nurturing it. It's like you're gonna plant a tree…It's not gonna pop up and be full of fruit. You have to plant the seed, nurture it, take the grass out…Then, it'll come up and it'll come strong. They'll have a firm foundation [common reference to spiritual and temporal harvests in both the Old and New Testaments such as Psalms 1:2-4, Jeremiah 12:1-3, Ezekiel 17:7-9 and 34:28-30, Matthew 13:3-5 and 31-33, Matthew 21, I Corinthians 3:5-7]. (UM Christian Educator)

Furthermore, holistic strategies require action aimed at drug- and crime-ridden areas in poor urban Black neighborhoods as a pre-requisite for establishing genuine community ties and subsequently altering the spiritual perspective of Blacks in these locales:

Stephen: It's like, let's feed them and forget about them. We'll see them next week. No one takes time to see exactly what to do. It looks like people are scared of coke on the streets, scared of being robbed - but how do we even begin to show them that we love them, unless we do something about the situation… without being given the word of God and ministered to. . . . and transformation takes place. (AME clergy)

Still some suggest the sobering reality of *cause competition* (Barnes, 2006) characterized by difficulty on the part of the Black Church to address the many social problems facing the Black community due to limited resources:

Mary: I think the church, it's like, having too many bills and not enough money to pay. The church has an overwhelming sense of responsibility to church people and to deal with their innermost beings, their spirituality. I'm not saying the church doesn't need to step up to the plate and take care of a lot of things in the community, people, homelessness, social issues – [but] the church has so much it can deal with. It has all these people - and more people are coming to church - 'cause you can only stretch your arm - the pastor can only stretch his arm, certain people, different ministers can only stretch to a certain extent and give so much of their time and effort. (Baptist clergy)

Regardless of denomination, clergy profile or gender, a large cadre of sample church leaders notes the need for the contemporary Black Church to embrace important elements of its predecessor *and* alter its stance and course to adapt to changing needs in the Black community (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Just as Black clergy were central to CRM efforts (Morris, 1984), some leaders believe clergy must be more assertive and proactive. As noted by the pastor below, part of its effectiveness entails the need to identify and acknowledge strengths and growth areas:

Benjamin: The times have changed; the church has to change in order to keep up with the times. But there are some things in changing that you do not discard. One of the greatest assets that the Black community has always had is his or her pastor - because they are not elected. The pastor is one of the most powerful personal leaders in the Black community, because they can say and attack issues that politicians cannot. So the threat of them - of not being elected is not there. (UM pastor)

Applying Cultural Theory, leaders conclude that the contemporary Black

Church should routinize those elements of its identity that have historically been most beneficial in combating social problems (i.e., a self-help tradition, clergy influence, scripture and symbols to inform and mobilize people, and a community focus) and re-frame those elements that now undermine its effectiveness (Bolman & Deal, 1991). This frame also confirms the reality that the Black Church must now contend with historic problems (i.e., poverty, discrimination) as well as complex contemporary ones (i.e., HIV/AIDS, increased incarcerated mothers) unbeknownst to their predecessors. Although clergy recommend a holistic response to social problems, most are not involved in holistic ministries as framed above but rather programs of a piece-mill nature. Most are involved in endeavors to help meet sacred and *certain* secular needs reflective of the Black Church self-help tradition such as: computer literacy, gender-specific ministries, clothing and food banks, Christian Education programs, and prison ministries. Several churches also have Community Development Corporations. These solutions are attempts to combat both long-existing social problems and relatively newer concerns. Yet most clergy acknowledge the relatively limited scope of these efforts as well as the potential strength if Black churches join forces. Thus the current frame represents a potential launching point for future, comprehensive national programs based on an intra-church agenda.

DISCUSSING CLERGY VIEWS

Most sample clergy consider the Black Church adaptive and resilient at combating *certain* social problems – yet critique its current relevance in proactively and effectively addressing many others. Just as frames are believed to evolve over time or may become co-opted or used differently

from their original intent, many clergy believe that the Black Church is not as intentional as it could be in addressing social problems. And although they acknowledge strides among Blacks, their discourse places the Black community in a continual fight for civil rights, equality, and economic empowerment. They argue that Black clergy, as the primary "social movement entrepreneurs" are also responsible for the Black Church's current limitations and potentially reinvigorating it (Oliver & Johnston, 2005; Snow & Benford, 1986, 1988). Their understanding of social problems and solutions is broadly grounded in the belief that: 1) they are part of a collective called the Black Church; 2) this collective provides certain broad beliefs, rituals, roles, and responsibilities to its congregants and community as exemplified by its predecessor; and, 3) it is largely responsible for addressing social problems in the Black community. These findings suggest that their framing processes are deeply embedded in both an intrinsic belief in their divinely-ordained roles as change agents as well as usage of historic Black Church-lead social action as an exemplar for future decisions and programs.

Clergy understand current social problems in the Black community and solutions based on four frames. It should be noted that frames were not discussed in a linear fashion as presented here, but were often interspersed throughout group discussions. Clergy tend to: (1) organize challenges based on an *Economic-focused frame*; (2) idealize and critique collective Church efforts using an *Historic Black Church frame*; (3) describe the required socio-psychological energy needed to restore the collective using a *Black Identity and Iconic Symbols frame*; and, re-interpret solutions and the Church's role in the process via an *Holistic Church Strategies frame* (Snow & Benford, 1988; Snow et al.,

1986). Additionally, the second frame reflects a master frame in its content, positioning by clergy, and correlation to historic frames and newer ones presented here. Non-pastors appear most vocal about the social problems faced by the Black community as well as most critical about the Black Church's response. For several topics, differences in views vary by gender; in general, Baptists and AMEs are most vocal.

Black Church cultural tools included in the framing processes are; prophetic scripture as well as events, figures, and symbols from Black history such as the CRM, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Frederick Douglas, and "Black pride" as well as symbols from the broader Black culture such as the "village motif" (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Swidler, 1986, 1995; Tarrow, 1998). Particularly, strategic inclusion of icons that were either martyred for the sake of Black advancement or committed their entire lives to such efforts fortifies frame credibility and represents a powerful approach to stimulate commitment (McAdam, 1996). As clergy with a similar life's purpose, they believe that they possess authority as movement leaders. As is the case in this analysis, the existence of multiple, often complementary, frames is common in social movement research to encourage broad-based participation (Bolman & Deal, 1991). However, based on the master frame here, clergy discourses are informed by issues such as inequality, unity, and collective action similar to a Civil Rights frame known to facilitate cycles of protest (Kubal, 1998; Oliver & Johnson, 2005; Snow & Benford, 1992). Interestingly, clergy tend to place much of the blame for the tide of current problems on the inability of the Black Church to proactively intervene. Clergy interactions evidence attempts to frame current conditions as a means to first re-energize existing adherents, especially Black clergy, and potentially mobilize the larger

Black community (Johnston & Noakes, 2005). And to them, the Black Church has the cultural legitimacy to spearhead redress.

THE NEXT STEP FOR BLACK CHURCH EFFORTS AND THEIR CLERGY

This project focuses on how social problems and solutions are understood among a group of 35 Black Church clergy. Findings evidence a framing process influenced by Black Church cultural components – particularly iconic images, scripture, self-help ideology, and a static, often romanticized model of the historic Black Church as a benchmark to gauge contemporary church efforts. Current emphasis on youth programs, food and clothing banks, educational ministries, and evangelism parallels earlier studies (DuBois, 1903[2003]; Mays & Nicholson, 1933) and suggest routinization of long-standing Black Church cultural beliefs, rituals, and events (Swidler, 1986). Examples of prison ministries and efforts to assist families of incarcerated people reflect re-framing of historic efforts to meet more current needs (Bolman & Deal, 1991).

Yet it is important to consider the limits of routinization because just as the *Historic Black Church frame* can engender reform, social action can be stymied if ineffective cultural tools or inconsistent frames are used (Johnston & Noakes, 2005). As noted by Bolman and Deal (1991), varied framing approaches are needed based on varied needs. Thus future research would benefit from inquiries about: Black Church efforts to create new frames; how existing cultural tools are employed in new and creative ways (example, the emergence of gospel rap music to attract and retain youth); and, why existing frames may not resonate with segments of the Black community who are young, poor, better educated, or those attracted to White churches and mega

churches (Harrison, 2005; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Have Black clergy views resonance does not equate to mobilization, studies should consider how Blacks may embrace Black Church frames, but choose to remain inactive or whether Black clergy framers represent elites with messages that do not resonate with masses of Blacks today (Gamson, 1992). Applied work should identify competing frames and other entrepreneurs with which they are competing for cultural supremacy (Johnston & Noakes, 2005; Noakes, 2005).

Clergy in this study place the Black Church at the helm of addressing problems and rarely expect the larger society to intervene. However this reliance on a self-help tradition may be potentially overwhelming based on existing church resources. The Black Church framing process is complex because in order to spearhead reform, it must not only assess and combat social problems such as inequality in the larger society and poverty in the Black community, but also identify, critique, prioritize, and address intra-church social problems such as competition and denominationalism. Most clergy here believe that the Black Church is actually *in process* - meaning that it is changing and adjusting in response to the needs of its members and the Black community. Part of this evolution is correlated with the framing and re-framing of social problems and strategies. However, changes are considered slow and generally believed to be reactive rather than proactive. Clergy identify effective dimensions of current outreach efforts; most also believe that more progress can still be made.

However, given systemic and historic inequalities, it is important to discuss *whether* responsibility for addressing the social problems noted in this study *should* rest primarily on the shoulders of the Black Church. Marginalized groups have tended to

changed with the election of the U.S.'s first Black president? And because frame privatize social problems (Barnes, 2005). This tendency can indirectly serve to exonerate the larger society from its role both as a causal factor and possible change agent. Many of the social problems presented here are manifesting in unexpected ways or reflect chronic situations. Therefore new, implementing innovative frames will require collaboration. Such re-framing has broad-sweeping implications and suggest that effective solutions to certain social problems require group processes that include the contemporary Black Church working in tandem with a myriad of other organizations and institutions. However, these clergy suggest that, by creating frames that require the Black Church to be primarily responsible for empowering the Black community means that Blacks will ultimately be champions of their own destinies.

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